

Is the Godfather of Mexico's Drug Trade Back in Business? (/news-analysis/is-the-godfather-of-mexico-drug-trade-back-in-business)

Written by Jesús Pérez Caballero* Monday, 25 July 2016



Rafael Caro Quintero in recent interview. by
Miguel Dimayuga/Proceso

The founder of Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news>)'s notorious and now defunct Guadalajara Cartel, Rafael Caro Quintero, has been linked to two recent events that have raised alarm among authorities three years after a controversial court ruling freed the veteran drug lord and current fugitive from prison.

Caro Quintero, now in his mid-60s, has been dubbed the "narco of narcos" and the godfather of Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news>) drug trafficking. After establishing himself as one of the country's most powerful drug lords in the 1980s, he was imprisoned in 1989 for drug trafficking, murder, and perhaps most importantly, for the abduction, torture and killing of Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, an agent for the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

Now, authorities suspect that the legendary crime boss could be attempting a comeback, after reports hinted at his involvement in a pair of recent confrontations involving the infamous Sinaloa Cartel (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/sinaloa-cartel>) and its jailed leader, Joaquin "El Chapo" (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/el-chapo>)" Guzmán -- a one-time underworld associate of Caro Quintero.

Caro Quintero started his career in the drug business in the 1970s running a mega-marijuana farm in northern Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news>) to supply the US market. He later progressed to the more lucrative business of trafficking Pablo Escobar's Colombian cocaine into the United States.

Shortly after the brutal murder of the DEA agent Camarena in 1985, Caro Quintero was detained in Costa Rica (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/60-costa-rica>) and transferred to Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news>). After nearly three decades behind bars, he was released on a technicality in 2013 and soon went underground.

Almost as soon as Caro Quintero was released, The US State Department offered (<http://www.state.gov/j/inl/narc/rewards/215334.htm>) a \$5 million reward for information leading to his arrest. The DEA also put him on their most wanted fugitives (<https://www.dea.gov/fugitives/la/DC666E8E-4281-4FB5-B803-9773F40868F0.shtml>) list, and Mexican authorities issued a new warrant for his arrest, saying he should serve out the remainder of his original 40-year sentence.

Since his 2013 release from prison, Caro Quintero seemed to be laying low. However, his name has surfaced in connection with an attack (/news-briefs/clashes-reflect-new-dynamics-of-criminal-violence-in-mexico) in mid-June on "El Chapo" (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/el-chapo>)" Guzmán's hometown in Sinaloa state. Guzmán was reputed to be Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news>)'s most powerful contemporary drug lord before his three recent arrests and two escapes, but the Sinaloa Cartel (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/sinaloa-cartel>) kingpin's luck seems to have taken a turn for the worse after his latest capture. He is now fighting extradition to the United States.

SEE ALSO: Sinaloa Cartel News and Profile (/mexico-organized-crime-news/sinaloa-cartel)

While the circumstances of that spate of violence in the mountains of Sinaloa remain unclear, most versions indicate the gunmen were working for the rival Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO), and some accounts (<http://www.proceso.com.mx/445334/ataque-a-badiraguato-regreso-caro-quintero-va-contra-chapo>) have linked Caro Quintero to the events.

Farther to the north, in the neighboring state of Coahuila, some official sources (/news-briefs/famed-mexico-drug-lord-challenging-sinaloa-cartel-official) have said Caro Quintero has been trying to move in on territory controlled by Guzmán's Sinaloa Cartel (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/sinaloa-cartel>). Beginning in 2008, the Sinaloa and Juarez cartels waged a bloody turf war (/investigations/juarez-war-stability-and-the-future) centered on the strategic border outpost of Ciudad Juárez. After several years of bloodshed, Guzmán's organization came out on top.



Enrique "Kiki" Camarena

More recently, Caro Quintero himself resurfaced in a secretly recorded interview (<http://rompeviento.tv/?p=10818>) with Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news>)'s Proceso news magazine published on July 25. He denied having problems with anyone except the authorities, whom he offered an apology. He said he had nothing to do with Camarena's 1985 murder, but was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"I am not at war with anyone. El Chapo (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/el-chapo>) and El Mayo (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/ismael-zambada-garcia-el-mayo>) are my friends," he told Proceso, referring to Guzmán and another top Sinaloa Cartel (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/sinaloa-cartel>) boss, Ismael Zambada Garcia, who remains at large. Caro Quintero said he was trying to get out of trouble, not into it.

If the official reports about Caro Quintero's return to active participation in Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news>)'s organized crime arena are accurate, any assessment of the notorious capo and his network's role in the country's current criminal dynamics should start with an understanding of their history.

The Logic of Cartel Violence

A good place to start is an examination of the interaction between the logic of the clan and the logic of the criminal organization.

Logic of the clan takes things personally. It tends to lead to revenge killings and collective punishment. For example, the violent attack in June that dislodged El Chapo (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/el-chapo>)'s mother from her home in the mountains of Sinaloa was reportedly motivated by the murder of a member of the Beltrán Leyva (/mexico-organized-crime-news/beltran-leyva-mexico) family, a killing allegedly ordered by El Chapo (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/el-chapo>)'s brother, Aurelino Guzmán.

The weekly Rio Doce magazine has reported that "El Chapo" opposed his brother's actions (<http://riodoce.mx/sincategoria/sangre-de-badiraguato-llega-al-penal>). These reported protestations apparently were not enough to forestall what the news site Estado Mayor (<http://www.estadomayor.mx/64713>) characterized as the "reactivation of the bloody conflict between the Beltrán Leyva and Guzmán Loera clans."

SEE ALSO: Coverage of the Beltran Leyva Org (/component/tags/tag/21-beltran-leyva-org)

On the other hand, the logic of organized crime revolves around territorial control. Disputes over trafficking routes and "plazas," as key centers of illegal activity are known, involve selective attacks targeting important individuals such as crime bosses, hit men, and even

small-scale traffickers working for a rival.

The historic battle ([/investigations/how-the-beltran-leyva-sinaloa-cartel-feud-bloodied-mexico](#)) between the once-allied Sinaloa and Beltrán Leyva cartels is an example of this logic. In fact, the recent violence in Sinaloa has a precedent in conflict between the two groups that caused the displacement of thousands of Sinaloa residents (<http://es.insightcrime.org/investigaciones/en-disputa-por-sierra-madre-antiguos-aliados-nuevos-enemigos-desplazan-a-miles>) in 2013.

These two forms of criminal logic -- of the clan and of the organization -- are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they constantly interact in an ebb and flow, at times reinforcing one another. The question now is how Caro Quintero might be inserting himself and his networks into this logic of criminal violence.

The veteran drug trafficker's roots in Badiraguato, Sinaloa -- the site of recent violence that displaced several hundred people -- provide personal connections and an opportunity to form or renew alliances in the area. However, it is the logic of the organization that poses the biggest threat to security and poses the most relevant questions.



Where is Caro Quintero?

Looking further south to Guadalajara, in Jalisco state, the US Treasury Department has linked Caro Quintero to luxury properties and the financial network (<http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion-mexico/2013/impreso/las-empresas-fantasma-de-los-caro-quintero-209569.html>) of Ismael Esparragoza "El Azul" ([/mexico-organized-crime-news/juan-jose-esparagoza-moreno-el-azul](#)), who reportedly worked with both the Sinaloa and Juarez cartels and promoted an alliance

(<http://www.animalpolitico.com/2016/01/juan-jose-el-azul-esparagoza-el-lider-conciliador-del-cartel-de-sinaloa/>) between them. In May 2016, the US Treasury Department designated Caro Quintero's common-law wife a narcotics trafficker (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0453.aspx>) and accused her of managing assets on his behalf. The couple met in a Jalisco prison around 2008 and allegedly have luxury real estate holdings in the state capital, Guadalajara.

Despite Caro Quintero's ties to Jalisco, the Jalisco Cartel (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/jalisco-cartel-new-generation>) - New Generation (CJNG) has in recent years taken over some of his old areas of operation there, according to the news outlet Milenio (http://www.milenio.com/policia/dificil-creer-autoridades-supieran-Mencho_0_535146507.html). Assuming Caro Quintero is still active and has focused his attention further north, it is unclear if he was displaced from Jalisco by competition or has moved voluntarily in search of greater opportunity.

SEE ALSO: Mexico News and Profiles (</mexico-organized-crime-news>)

The aging fugitive may be avoiding Jalisco because law enforcement is generating too much heat there. Authorities have mounted a heavily militarized hunt in Jalisco for CJNG leader Nemesio Oseguera, alias "El Mencho." (</mexico-organized-crime-news/nemesio-oseguera-ramos-alien-mencho>) The state is also home to the penitentiary where Caro Quintero last served time. Exploring opportunities further north in places where he has contacts and that are less heavily patrolled by Mexican authorities might be a logical choice.

Sonora is another possible base of operations (<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2016/06/29/politica/019n2pol>), security sources recently told the newspaper La Jornada. Sonora is a large state north of Sinaloa that accounts for most of Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news>)'s border with the US state of Arizona. In the south, Sonora also borders Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news>)'s Golden Triangle (</news-briefs/mexico-federal-patrols-golden-triangle>), a strategic region for both opium poppy cultivation and drug trafficking.

La Jornada's sources claimed Caro Quintero has enlisted the support of former Beltrán Leyva hit men who created their own groups, Los Pelones and Los Gueros. In February 2015, a close associate reportedly married to one of Caro Quintero's family members was arrested in Sonora (<http://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2015/02/23/1009936>) and accused of managing cross-border drug traffic.

Who is Caro Quintero Working With?

The security sources cited by *La Jornada* speculated that Caro Quintero had strengthened his position in Sonora following the February 2016 arrest of Francisco Javier Hernandez Garcia (http://www.milenio.com/policia/Detienen_lider_cartel_Beltran_Leyva-Francisco_Javier_Hernandez_Garcia_0_675532580.html), alias "El 2000." Authorities identified the captured trafficker as a member of the Hernandez clan, allies of the Beltrán Leyva cartel, and a controller of drug routes through the state.

Whether or not Caro Quintero had anything to do with the violence in and around El Chapo (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/el-chapo>)'s home town in June -- and which side he might have been aligned with in that conflict -- is unclear at best.

Reporte Indigo recently cited (<http://www.reporteindigo.com/reportes/mexico/caro-quintero-el-capo-que-no-se-ha-ido>) federal government intelligence sources who said Caro Quintero continued to operate during his long years in prison with the help of "El Chapo" (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/el-chapo>), and has assumed control of much of the Sinaloa Cartel (<http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/sinaloa-cartel>)'s operation since Guzmán went back to prison in January 2016.

Sorting out fact from fiction is rarely easy when it comes to matters of organized crime. But if the central government's intelligence is true to its name, it does appear that Caro Quintero, despite 28 years behind bars, has maintained a variety of contacts and networks in the drug trafficking world. In a criminal landscape that is characterized by a multitude of actors and continuous shifting of alliances, the "narco of narcos" appears to be in an advantageous position.

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